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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0148  
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SUBJECT: DRC REFUGEES TO RWANDA - UNHCR PREPARING FOR POSSIBLE LARGE FLOWS

Classified By: Ambassador Michael R. Arietti, reason 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: UNHCR Kigali Representative Annette Nyekan and External Relations Officer Christina Alfirev met with Poloff recently to discuss current movements of refugees to Rwanda from neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Refugee flows to Rwanda have slowed recently, despite the outbreak of conflict in eastern DRC. Although the Rwanda - DRC border has been reinforced and closed to combatants, refugees are still able to cross. UNHCR Uganda, however, has received many people fleeing the situation in the Kivus. UNHCR and the Government of Rwanda are making preparations to accept large numbers of refugees should the flow shift to Rwanda. End summary.

¶2. (C) According to UNHCR Representative Annette Nyekan and External Relations Officer Christina Alfirev, UNHCR Kigali figures show fewer refugees have arrived in Rwanda since the most recent outbreak of hostilities in eastern DRC than in previous months. In September, there were 1271 arrivals, 1149 in October, 717 in November. As of mid-December, UNHCR had recorded 200 new arrivals. Alfirev reported most of the refugees were women and children who expected fighting in the region to continue, and that many of them had come to Rwanda from areas controlled by renegade general Laurent Nkunda. She also noted a number of refugees had left DRC to avoid being forced by increased fighting into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, where they fear they will be threatened because of their Tutsi ethnicity. She said a few Rwandese were crossing over to DRC and returning to Rwanda, trying to present themselves as Congolese refugees eligible for assistance.

¶3. (C) Alfirev said that while UNHCR Rwanda has received a diminishing number of Congolese refugees, UNHCR in Uganda has had "huge" arrival numbers from North Kivu. Alfirev said flows from South Kivu, where recent conflict has been less intense, have been fairly steady, and suggested some refugees from that region may be fleeing poverty more than active conflict. She said the Rwanda-DRC border had been reinforced and closed to combatants, though refugees are still able to cross.

¶4. (C) Nyekan outlined UNHCR's preparations to deal with the possibility of a much higher influx of Congolese refugees if the security situation deteriorates. UNHCR is regularly updating its contingency plan and it serves as co-chair with the Prime Minister's office on a disaster management task

force that includes other UN agencies and NGOs. Nyekan reported UNHCR Rwanda is in constant contact with regional UNHCR offices and field staff, and they are encouraging the Government of Rwanda (GOR) to convene a meeting of other humanitarian actors as part of the preparation process. Nyekan said UNHCR is now on alert, but cannot move to emergency status until the GOR formally declares a state of emergency.

¶ 15. (C) UNHCR is assessing its current capacities to house and support new refugees. Nyekan said there have been discussions with the GOR about the possibility of opening another full camp for a minimum of 10,000 people, and potential sites have been determined. Nyekan said a transit center or a smaller camp would be insufficient to meet short-term needs. In the meantime, UNHCR is amassing non-food items and examining trucking capability along the Rwanda-DRC border, should movement of refugees and supplies become necessary. Nyekan emphasized that UNHCR is currently in "maintenance mode" in Rwanda, and a shift to emergency services would require a concentrated effort from UN agencies, the GOR, and other NGOs. Nyekan predicted UNHCR would need between four to six weeks to be totally prepared for a large number of new arrivals from DRC, but said an emergency response team based in Tanzania could be mobilized within 24 hours should such a situation arise.

¶ 16. (SBU) Comment: Recent refugee flows from DRC to Rwanda do not reflect the violent situation in the Kivus, as many are currently fleeing to Uganda. However, UNHCR Kigali and the GOR are preparing for a possible humanitarian crisis on this side of the border should refugee flows turn toward Rwanda. UNHCR is not yet ready to handle a large influx of fleeing Congolese, but is hurrying to be able to do so. End comment.

ARIETTI